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FAMILY CORRESPONDENCE
OF FRANKLIN.

THE public owes Mr. Duane, of Philadelphia, thanks for this carefully presented series of the family letters of Franklin. They were, at one time, with others, in the possession of his grandson, William Temple Franklin, and now belong to Dr. Franklin Bache. They have been hitherto kept from the eye of the public, and though containing nothing involving any matters of delicacy to be held in reserve, it is, perhaps, now, at the earliest moment, that they could with propriety, be issued. Details, which, when they were written, were the familiar trifles of the day, valuable only to the ear of affection, have now acquired a new interest as time and the change of manners throw them into stronger relief. Without further preamble we will glean for the reader, from a volume of limited circulation, printed only in a small edition by subscription, such noticeable passages as have struck us on perusal—we confess with a fondness for everything which relates to Franklin.

We have not heard a great deal of Franklin's mother. Her son's Autobiography records her "excellent constitution," and the epitaph which he wrote for the grave of his parents pronounces her "a discreet and pious woman." She was the daughter of Peter Folger, the poet of Nantucket, "suckled all her ten children," and lived to a good old age, dying at eighty-five. We should like to know more than these scanty notices in Sparks, especially after reading the following characteristic letter in the book before us. It is dated Boston, 1751, the year before her death, to her son, then forty-five, and reaping his harvest of civic honors. It is a very old time letter, full of canny care and solicitude, with one eye on the honor, another on the profit:

"Loving Son and Daughter :

I did not write to you last post, but it was because I was taken with the stomach-ache so bad all day that I could not sit up to write on any account. My cousin, Kesiah Coffin, was here last week, and she was sorry that the works and

* Letters to Benjamin Franklin, from his Family and Friends, 1751—1791: New-York, C. Benjamin Richardson.

letter was not yet printed. She bid me tell you that she should be glad to know how soon you could do them, for she wants to have a few of them very much. My cousin, Henry Coffin, is gone to your place. I am afraid he will get the small-pox there. I desire you would advise him not to go anywhere [where] you know or think it has been; and if you have any business with him, send him away as fast as you can. I am glad to hear you are so well respected in your town for them to choose you an Alderman, altho' I don't know what it means, or what the better you will be of it besides the honor of it. I hope you will look up to God, and thank him for all his good providences towards you. He has granted you much in that place, and I am very thankful for it. I hope that you will carry well, so that you may be liked in all your posts. I am very weak and short-breathed, so that I can't sit up to write much, altho' I sleep well a-nights and my cough is better, and I have a pretty good stomach to my victuals. Pray excuse my bad writing and inditing, for all tell me I am too old to write letters. I can hardly see, and am grown so deaf that I can hardly hear anything that is said in the house. Love and service to all friends, from your loving mother,

ABIAH FRANKLIN."

On the news of her death her son wrote: "She has lived a good life as well as a long one, and is happy."

Mrs. Franklin furnishes seven letters to the collection. They are written from Philadelphia to her husband in London on homely domestic matters, occasionally impinged upon by the growing public difficulties of the times. In Naples, the year after Franklin had gone to England as Colonial Agent, she writes: "I am set down to confab a little with my dear child, as it seems a sort of a holyday, for we have an ox roasting on the river, and most people seem pleased with the affair; but as I partake of none of the diversions, I stay at home, and flatter myself that the next packet will bring me a letter from you. * * *

We have nothing stirring among us but pamphlets and scurrility, but I have never said or done anything, or any of my family, you may depend on it, nor shall we. All our good friends call on us as usual, and we have been asked out,

but I have not gone, but Sally has within this month, but she was at Billy's almost seven weeks." Sally is her daughter, afterwards Mrs. Bache. Billy is the Governor of New-Jersey, and who "the dear child," to whom the letter is addressed is, may be gathered from its conclusion: "I am, my dear child, your affectionate wife." The poor fluttering wife—we see her little anxieties in such phrases as this: "I am so very poor a writer that I don't undertake to say anything about the discord in this part of the world; but to me it seems we are very wicked, and so is the people in London and other places on your side of the water. I pray God mend us all."

A longer and a highly interesting letter describes the arrangements of Dr. Franklin's house in Philadelphia, built for him in his absence by his wife, in which he lived on his return from Europe and in which he died. The letter is full of curious detail:

"When you went from home, Billy desired to take some more of your books than what you laid out, so I got him a trunk to take them up in; and as the shelves look pretty empty, I took down the rest and dusted them, and had the shelves taken down and put up in the south garrets in the new house, and Miss Elmer and myself put them up. I took all the dead letters and papers that were in the garret and put them into boxes, barrels and bags, as I did not know in what manner you would have shelves in your room. Now this I did for several reasons: one, as it did employ my mind and keep me very busy, and as the weather was pretty good, and I should make room if Mrs. Franklin should come to town to stay any time I was ready to receive her. Now for the room we call yours: there is in it your desk, the harmonica made like a desk, a large chest with all the writings that were in your room down stairs, the boxes of glass for music and for the electricity, and all your clothes and the pictures, as I don't drive nails lest it should not be right. Sally has the south room two pair of stairs; in it is a bed, a bureau, a table, a glass, and the picture she used to have in her room, a trunk and books, but these you can't have any notion of. The north room Nancy took for her own use, and I can't tell much about it, only it has a bed and curtains, and it is kept locked. I never saw it but once

I think, except when she was ill. The blue room has the harmonica and the harpsichord in it, the gilt sconce, the card-table, a set of tea china I bought since you went from home, the worked chairs and screen, a very handsome mahogany stand for the tea-kettle to stand on, and the ornamental china; but the room is not as yet finished, for I think the paper has lost much of its bloom by pasting of it up, therefore I thought best to leave it till you came home: the curtains are not made, nor did I press for them, as we had a great number of flies, as it is observed, they are very fond of new paint. The south room I sleep in, with my Susannah, a bed without curtains, a chest of drawers, a table, a glass, and old black walnut chairs, some books in my closet, and some of our family pictures. In the front room, which I designed for ———, I had the bed which you sent from England, a chamber mahogany table and stand; in the room down stairs is the sideboard that you bespoke, which is very handsome and plain, with two tables made to suit it, and a dozen of chairs also. I sold to Mr. Foxcraft the tables we had, as they did not suit the room by any means. The patterns of the chairs are a plain horsehair, and look as well as paddusoy; everybody admires them. The little south room I had papered, as the walls were much soiled; in that is a pretty card table and our chairs that used to stand in the parlor, and ornamental china over the fireplace; on the floor, a carpet I bought cheap for the goodness; it is not quite new. The large carpet is in the blue room; the fire not made yet. In the room for our friends the picture of the Earl of Bute is hung up, and a glass.

"This is but a very imperfect account. In the parlor there is a Scotch carpet which was found much fault with, and your timepiece stands in one corner, which is all wrong I am told; so then I tell them we shall have all these as they should be when you come home. As to curtains, I leave it to you to do as you like yourself; or if, as you talked before you went away, if you could meet with a Turkey carpet I should like it, but if not I shall be very easy, as all these things have become quite indifferent to me at this time; but, since you do so kindly inquire what things I want, I will tell you that when Mrs. Franklin came to town and went to the assembly, Sally had nothing

fit to wear, suitable to wait on her; and as I never should have put on in your absence anything good, I gave Sally my new robe, as it wanted very little altering; I should be glad if you would bring me a plain satin gown, and if our cousin would make me a little lace of a proper width for a cape or two, I should like it as it was their making, and a light cloak such as you sent for Sally, but it must be bigger than hers. I should have had that, but it was too small for me. In the north room we sit, as it is not quite finished yet, as the doors are not up; we have a table and chairs, and the small book case, brother John's picture, and the king and queen's picture, and a small Scotch carpet on the floor. I desire you to remember drinking glasses and a large table cloth or two when you come, but I shan't want them till then. If you should meet with a pair of silver canisters I should like it; but as you please, everything I have mentioned. When I say doors, it is the closet doors; they are glazed, but it was unknown to me; they are in your room. I shall count the panes, and send to you. The crane was put up this week, and not before; the rails not done as yet, but promised soon to be done. O my child, there is great odds between a man's being at home and abroad; as everybody is afraid they shall do wrong, so everything is left undone."

Mrs. Sarah Bache, Franklin's only daughter, writes a number of cheerful letters, as maid and wife—charged, of course, with commissions upon London: gloves, lavender, tooth powder, satin to be dyed—in fine, most of the minor wants of life, the contents of Autolycus' pack, for which the colonists, a hundred years ago, drew upon the Old World. Mrs. Kirkland, in her picturesque *Life of Washington*, has preserved many of these old orders, exhibiting the dependence upon Europe in those days for articles of convenience and luxury. It must have enlarged a lady's imagination to do her shopping in London and watch the changes of the weather, waiting upon the anxieties of the shipping list for the return voyage from London.

Mrs. Bache's domestic letters are very sprightly. Of her "little girl" she writes: "She is a fine brown lass, but her sparkling black eyes make up for her skin, and when in health she has a good color. I would give a good deal you could see

her; you can't think how fond of kissing she is, and gives such old fashioned smacks. General Arnold says he would give a good deal to have her for a school mistress to teach the young ladies how to kiss." If the general had only confined himself to these little gallantries, and left treason alone, how much more respect we should have for his *petits soins*. The ladies may be interested in these details of housekeeping in 1778:

"If I was to mention the prices of the common necessities of life, it would astonish you. I have been all amazement since my return, such an odds have two years made that I can scarcely believe that I am in Philadelphia. This time twelvemonth when I was in town, I never went out or bought anything, leaving it till I got up again, expecting we should stay, so that we ran away quite unprovided. I had two pieces of linen at the weaver's; it has been there these eighteen months, and if it had not been for my friends [I] must have suffered, as it could not be brought where we were. I should tell you that I had seven table cloths of my own spinning, chiefly wove before we left Chester county; it was what we were spinning when you went. I find them very useful and they look very well, but they now ask four times as much for weaving as they used to ask for the linen, and flax not to be got without hard money. I am going to write to cousin Jonathan Williams to purchase me linen for common sheets; buying them here is out of the question; they really ask me six dollars for a pair of gloves, and I have been obliged to pay fifteen pounds fifteen shillings for a common calamanco petticoat without quilting, that I once could have got for fifteen shillings. I buy nothing but what I really want, and wore out my silk ones before I got this. I do not mention these things by way of complaint; I have much less reason to complain than most folks I know; besides, I find I can go without many things I once thought absolutely necessary."

Franklin, it would appear, expostulated with Madame upon her tastes and demands. She writes in a style which fairly runs away with the subject:

"But how could my dear papa give me so severe a reprimand for wishing a little

finery? he would not, I am sure, if he knew how much I have felt it. Last winter was a season of triumph to the Whigs, and they spent it gayly; you would not have had me, I am sure, stay away from the ambassador's or Gerard's entertainments, nor when I was invited to spend the day with General Washington and his lady, and you would have been the last person, I am sure, to have wished to see me dressed with singularity; though I never loved dress so much, as to wish to be particularly fine, yet I never will go out, when I cannot appear so as to do credit to my family and husband. The assembly we went to, as Mr. B. was particularly chosen to regulate them; the subscription was fifteen pounds; but to a subscription ball, of which there were numbers, we never went to one, though always asked. I can assure my dear papa, that industry in this house is by no means laid aside; but as to spinning linen, we cannot think of that till we have got that wove which we spun three years ago. Mr. Duffield has bribed a weaver that lives on his farm, to weave me eighteen yards, by making him three or four shuttles for nothing, and keeping it a secret from the country people, who will not suffer them to weave for those in town. This is the third weaver's it has been at, and many fair promises I have had about it. 'Tis now done and whitening, but forty yards of the best remains at Litiz yet, that I was to have had done a twelvemonth last month. Mrs. Keppele, who is gone to Lancaster, is to try to get it done there for me, but not a thread will they weave but for hard money. My maid is now spinning wool for winter stockings for the whole family, which will be no difficulty in the manufacturing, as I knit them myself. I only mention these things, that you may see, that the balls are not the only reason that the wheel is laid aside. I did not mention the feathers and pins as necessities of life, as my papa seems to think. I meant that as common necessities were so dear, I could not afford to get anything that was not, and begged he would send me a few of the others; nor should I have had such wishes, but being in constant hope that things would soon return to their former channel, I kept up my spirits, and wished to mix with the world; but that hope with me is now entirely over, and this winter approaches with so many horrors, that I shall not want anything to go

abroad in, if I can be comfortable at home. My spirits, which I have kept up during my being drove about from place to place, much better than most people's I have met with, have been lowered by nothing but the depreciation of the money, which has been amazing lately, so that home will be the place for me this winter, as I cannot get a common winter cloak and hat, but just decent, under two hundred pounds; as to gauze, now it is fifty dollars a yard, 'tis beyond my wish, and I should think it not only a shame but a sin to buy it, if I had millions. I should be contented with muslin caps if I could procure them in the winter,—in the summer I went without; and as to cambric, I have none to make lace of. It is indeed as you say, that money is too cheap, for there are so many people that are not used to have it nor know the proper use of it, that get so much that they care not whether they give one dollar or a hundred for anything they want; but to those, whose every dollar is the same as a silver one, which is our case, it is particularly hard, for Mr. B. could not bear to do business in the manner it has been done in this place, which has been almost all by monopolizing and forestalling; however, if he gets business from France, all may yet be well again."

Of some eighty letters in the volume, more than a third are from Mrs. Mecom, Franklin's sister, the youngest of the seventeen, and his survivor by a few years. She was married at fifteen, bore twelve children, supported many years of widowhood in indigent circumstances, and died at the age of eighty-two. Her granddaughter is now living at ninety-four. The readers of Mr. Sparks' collection, will remember the many excellent letters of Franklin to this lady, his solicitude for her son, "Benny," whom he set up as a printer, and whose youthful peccadilloes called forth an admirable epistle, full of tolerance over the habits of boys and the waywardness of apprentices; his constant attentions to her wants and, what is especially pleasing to view, the growing cheerfulness of the correspondence, as both parties descend in the vale of years. Some of Franklin's best stories are in these letters to his sister. We have now the counterpart in her good sense and frankness. She writes much about domestic affairs, Franklin being a father to the whole family; occasionally

of public affairs, often of her own afflictions, of which she had many, in the loss of children. There is something exceedingly touching in these bulletins of woe—in their naked statements: "It has pleased God to diminish us fast, and thereby your expenses and care of us. It has now pleased God to take poor Peter. His mouth was opened just before his death, to commit himself to the mercy of God, and with a blessing on those about him, and sunk into eternity without a groan." In another letter, we learn how Franklin's success in life, and the public sphere in which he moved, had impressed his relatives. He had expressed a wish to pass his last days with her: "O my dear brother, if this could be accomplished, it would give me more joy than anything on this side of Heaven could possibly do. I feel the want of a suitable conversation—I have but little here. I think I could assume more freedom with you now, and convince you of my affection for you. I have had time to reflect and see my error in that respect. I suffered my diffidence and the awe of your superiority to prevent the familiarity I might have taken with you and ought, and which your kindness to me might have convinced me would be acceptable."

Franklin was fond of the sex, and the sex was fond of him. The gallant courtesies passing between him and the ladies of Versailles, had not failed to reach the ears of his sister, who, in 1779, reminds him: "I now and then hear of your health and glorious achievements in the political way, as well as in the favor of the ladies ('since you have rubbed off the mechanic rust, and commenced complete courtier') who, Jonathan Williams writes me, claim from you the tribute of an embrace, and it seems you do not complain of the tax as a very great penance." The same year, wearied of the long contest, she recalls Franklin's prophecy of its continuance: "The dismal sound of fifteen years from the commencement of the war dwells on my mind, which I once heard you say it might last."

Sister Jane has an allusion to Franklin's capital poker story, which was getting about in the American papers. "The story of the Frenchman with the poker was a good story when you told it, but it appears to me there was none of your d— your souls in it." To which Franklin (the letter is in Sparks) replies, "As you observe, there was no swearing in the

story of the poker, when I told it," and goes on as usual, with another: "The late new dresser of it was, probably, the same, or perhaps akin to him, who, in relating a dispute that happened between Queen Anne and the Archbishop of Canterbury, concerning a vacant mitre, which the Queen was for bestowing on a person the Archbishop thought unworthy, made both Queen and the Archbishop swear three or four thumping oaths in every sentence of the discussion, and the Archbishop at last gained his point. One present at this tale, being surprised, said, 'But did the Queen and the Archbishop swear so at one another?' 'O no, no,' says the relator; 'that is only *my way* of telling the story.'" The poker story is not too decent after its profanity is removed. It may be read in old American jest-books. Franklin applied it to the overtures by the British ministry of reconciliation, after the colonists had destroyed the stamps, if the Americans would pay for damage they had done. A Frenchman sallies out into the street with a red hot poker, and politely insists that any Englishman he meets should submit to its personal infliction. The Englishman poh poh's the crazy Frenchman, with contempt, till finally the latter, abandoning his ground, claims that at least he should be paid for heating the poker.

In the same summer of 1786, amidst the rejoicing of the Fourth of July celebration at Philadelphia, her brother sends Mrs. Mecom that pleasant anecdote of "Betty:" "You need not be concerned, in writing to me, about your bad spelling; for, in my opinion, as our alphabet now stands, the bad spelling, or what is called so, is generally the best, as conforming to the sound of the letters and of the words. To give you an instance: A gentleman received a letter, in which were these words, '*Not finding Brown at hom, I delivered your meseg to his yf.*' The gentleman finding it bad spelling, and therefore not very intelligible, called his lady to help him read it. Between them they picked out the meaning of all but the *yf*, which they could not understand. The lady proposed calling her chambermaid, because Betty, says she, has the best knack at reading bad spelling of any one I know. Betty came, and was surprised, that neither Sir nor Madam could tell what *yf* was. 'Why,' says she, '*yf* spells *wife*; what else can it spell?' And indeed, it is a much better, as well as

shorter method of spelling *wife*, than *doubleyou, i, f, e*, which in reality spell *doubleyouife*." To all which, Jane responds: "I think, Sir and Madam were very deficient in sagacity, that they could not find out *yf* as well as Betty, but sometimes the Betties have the brightest understanding."

Sister Jane took an interest in Franklin's phonography, for which he had a fondness: "I have two favors to ask of you now: your new alphabet of the English language, and the Petition of the letter Z. It would be a feast to General Green's wife, if I may be permitted to let her see it." Both of these literary curiosities may be read in Mr. Sparks' collection. The "Petition" was an imitation of a letter to the *Tatler*, purporting to be from No. 1778 of that journal, and was addressed "To the Worshipful Isaac Bickerstaff, Esquire, Censor General." Franklin was fond of these literary advices; in fact, in addition to his statemanship, science, and philosophy, and other notable accomplishments, was a capital magazine editor.

Time runs on. Franklin is entering upon one of his last public honors—membership of the Convention of the Constitution; his sister sees in it a renewal of his youth. "I wanted to tell you how much pleasure I enjoy in the constant and lively mention made of you in the newspapers, which make you appear to me like a young man of twenty-five, just setting out for the other eighty years, full of great designs for the benefit of mankind, and your own nation in particular, which I hope, with the assistance of such a number of wise men as you are connected with in the Convention, you will gloriously accomplish." A year later, she writes with the affection of age for childhood, one of the most tender blessings of advancing years, to Franklin, of his grandchildren: "It is said, Mr. Bache is remarkable for having the finest children in Philadelphia. How much pleasure must they give you when you have ease to enjoy it! *I long to have every one to kiss and play with, that I see pass the street, that looks clean and healthy.*" But the end is approaching: January 17, 1790, three months before his death, she writes—this is her last letter in this collection:—"This day, my dear brother completes his 84th year. You cannot, as old Jacob, say, few and evil have they been. Except those wherein

you have endured such grievous torments latterly, yours have been filled with innumerable good works, benefits to your fellow-creatures, and thankfulness to God; that, notwithstanding the distressing circumstances before mentioned, yours must be esteemed a glorious life. Great increase of glory and happiness, I hope, await you. May God mitigate your pain and continue your patience yet many years, for who that know and love you can bear the thought of surviving you in this gloomy world?"

There is one letter from Miss Mary Stevenson, the daughter of Franklin's London, Craven-street, landlady, with whom he corresponded on natural history, and other scientific subjects. It is a reply to a letter of Franklin, in which he had suggested philosophical caution, citing, as usual, a good anecdote in reference to the heat of the waters at Bristol, and which, after a long lecture on the tide in rivers, concludes with an apologetic compliment to the lady. Miss Stevenson writes very sensibly in return for the science, and has a very pretty modesty in accepting the compliment: "Such a letter is, indeed, the highest compliment. What you concluded it with, I should think too far strained to be sincere, if I did not flatter myself it proceeded from the warmth of your affection, which makes you see merit in me that I do not possess. It would be too great vanity to think I deserve the encomiums you give me, and it would be ingratitude to doubt your sincerity. Continue, my indulgent friend, your favorable opinion of me, and I will endeavor to be what you imagine me."

Miss Stevenson, it will be remembered, afterward became Mrs. Hewson, and in her widowhood resided in this country, where she died, leaving esteemed descendants in Philadelphia.

There are three or four letters of William Franklin, at Burlington, containing notices of agriculture and politics, but with little of personal interest. Indeed, we care more for the humbler details furnished by Franklin's lady correspondents. They reflect the great patriot's habitual *bonhomie* and active spirit of kindness. If the light they throw upon the life of one of the most wonderful men of his time is small, we may be thankful for that little; for we believe the world always willingly hears of WASHINGTON and FRANKLIN.—*The Century*.